



August 2014

NEWSLETTER FOR THE PAID & VOLUNTEER STAFF OF RAILTOWN 1897 STATE HISTORIC PARK

Upcoming Events

**August 5**

Ladies Luncheon 11:30am  
Eproson House in Twain  
Harte, Marge @ 533-4595

**August 6**

Wednesday trains @ 12 & 2  
Storytime @ 11am

**August 13**

Wednesday trains @ 12 & 2  
Storytime @ 11am

**August 20**

Wednesday trains @ 12 & 2  
Storytime @ 11am

**August 23**

Meals on Wheels@ Railtown  
Fiesta Train @ 6pm

**August 23 & 24**

Railtown booth at the Gold &  
Outdoor Festival, Sonora  
Fairgrounds

**August 27**

Wednesday trains @ 12 & 2  
Storytime @ 11am

**August 30, 31 & Sept. 1**

Labor Day Weekend  
Trains Sat., Sun. & Monday

**September 2**

Ladies Luncheon 11:30am  
The Home Place, 1210 San-  
guinetti Rd. Sonora  
Call Marge @ 533-4595



Singer/Banjoist  
James Nelson  
Returns to entertain Labor  
Day weekend

What the Heck is a Gandy Dancer?

Karen Kling/ Park Interpretive Specialist

Recently, the term gandy dancer was brought to my attention. I had never heard of that term and thought, “what the heck is a gandy dancer?” “What I thought would be a simple, straightforward little re-search project for an answer instead took me down many a twisting, winding track as you will see. The World English Dictionary defines gandy dancer as: **N – slang: a railway track maintenance worker. Origin: 1915-1920. Dancer apparently in reference to the rhythmic movements characteristic of such work. Gandy is unexplained.**

Well, the dancer part sounded pretty straightforward according to the WED. I should have stopped there..... but I read on and came across other, more elaborate definitions as to why they were called dancers.



“The constant motion of the track workers as they lunged against the tools in unison to nudge the rail, usually accompanied by a chant, looked like dancing.”

“They waddled like ganders while running on the railroad ties.”

“In some references, the term is described as specific to those workers who built the track, others state that the actual layers of the railroad track were hardly ever called gandy dancers but the job was ascribed to checking ties, bolts, tracks and roadbeds for necessary repairs. However, most sources refer to gandy dancers as men who did the difficult physical work of track maintenance under the direction of an overseer. Most references refer to the dancing movements of the workers using a specially manufactured 5 foot lining bar (which may have come to be called a gandy) as a lever in track alignment.”



(continued next page....)





# Remembering Cliff !

We will miss our good friend and dedicated volunteer Cliff Hughes who passed away Tuesday, July 15. Cliff was invited to join us as a volunteer by Al Lehr in 2004. Since then Cliff contributed many volunteer hours in Maintenance and Restoration, represented our park in parades, worked very hard restoring the #7 caboose, and as a Stationmaster on most Sundays. He was a retiree from the University of San Francisco after 37 years after holding many managerial and directorial positions.



Dedicated Stationmaster

at the 2013 volunteer appreciation dinner with daughter Melissa

With long time friend Doris Warburton



**(continued from page 1)** “Each workman carried a lining bar, a straight pry bar with a sharp end. The thicker bottom end was square-shafted (to fit against the rail) and shaped to a chisel point (To dig down into the gravel underneath the rail); the lighter top end was rounded for better gripping. When lining the track, each man would face one of the rails and work the chisel end of his lining bar down at an angle into the ballast under it. Then all would take a step toward their rail and pull up and forward on their pry bars to lever the track-rails, cross ties and all over and through the ballast.” (Encyclopedia of Alabama – Folklore Section)

“When I was a young man on the hobo road, I worked the temporary section gangs on the Western Pacific out of Winnemucca, Nevada and the Denver and Rio Grande Western at Grand Junction, Colorado. We were all referred to as Gandy Dancers. The gangs I worked on were “tie gangs” meaning we replaced worn ties. In replacing a tie, we would pry the rail and tie plate up high enough to drag the adjacent worn tie out of its nest and a new one took its place. ....We used a tool that was actually called a gandy (and yes it was manufactured by the Gandy Shovel Company) to do the prying. The tool was a six or seven foot hickory handle of very stout diameter; attached to one end was a steel plate or lip that we’d jam between the ties and loosen a tie plate. By bending the gandy back, we naturally raise the rail above the next tie. To gain leverage, we’d push down on the handle as near as possible and if we weren’t able to raise the rail far enough, we’d actually stand on the handle using our full body weight for maximum purchase. Some of the guys were rather adept at this technique and could stand balanced out on the end of that handle while the rest of us blocked the raised rail. The “art” of standing on the gandy without falling off was known as gandy dancing.”

“It originated with the Irish track crews working on the Transcontinental RR (Central Pacific)- rails that needed to be curved would be set up on their side between a tie at each end; men would stand on the rail to bow it, and as two fellows with sledge hammers (one on each side of the rail) would rhythmically work their way down the rail to pound it into an appropriate arc, each succeeding man on the rail would have to “dance” (jump) out of the way at just the right time, like it was choreographed (to the ringing of hammer on rail). **(continue next page)**

...“My late father worked the summer of 1953 as a gandy dancer. His explanation for the name was that a tool used to lift the tie was called a gandy, which looked like a spoon without a wide end. You had to wedge it under the tie, then walk out the length of the tool, and jump up and down to leverage the tie up so ballast could be shovelled under it. It was a very difficult job. If you weighed less than 160 pounds, you couldn't do it, while if you weighed more than 185 pounds, you'd “spring” too much and get thrown off. He said the entire time you were flexing the gandy, you'd absorb as much spring as possible with your legs, while working to the rhythm of a chanted sing-song that was used by the two shovelers to time their “throw” of rock under the tie.” Hmmm...well, that certainly clears the dancer part up. How about the gandy half?

“The tool used by the Gandy dancers was called a gandy, but where this name came from is an even greater mystery. Many sources state that “Gandy” refers to the Gandy Shovel Company, (or the Gandy Manufacturing Company or the Gandy Tool Company), of Chicago. This source of this information seems to originate in a reference book called *Railroad Avenue* by Freeman H. Hubbard which was published in 1945. However no one has found any confirmation of such a company(s) nor is there a record of a “Gandy” stamped tool in any railroad museum.” “Some have suggested that “Gandy” may be a corruption of the company's actual name. One thought is that they might have been manufactured by a company with a name such as “G and D”. If you say “G and D” out loud, it sounds very similar to the formulation, “Gandy”. And it is easy to imagine how the simpler name was popularized, if this is so. So, could it be G & D Tool, G & D Manufacturing, or something similar? There are several Chicago companies with G and D in their name that are possible candidates. “ “The gandy company produced aligning bars, tamping bars and shovels, all with the company name “Gandy” on them. Almost all of the “gangs” that I worked in had a lead man that chanted while the gang worked. The chant would keep everyone working “dancing” together at the same rate. It was great for aligning track, you would have a dozen men moving panels of track from side to side easily, to make it straight. When the “Gandys” were in use, the section foremen were very competitive. They were awarded prizes for the best sections. After grooming the track and the right of way, we would “dress” the stone ballast so that it was an unbroken straight line along the edge. We used “brush hooks” to clean away the small trees, but I don't recall Gandy being on the brush hooks.”

***(There are many who have researched this line of thought and believed that any reference to a manufacturing company is just an urban legend).***

Another investigator had a discussion with the librarian at the Colorado Railroad Museum. The librarian stated that he had heard the word “gandy” came from a manufacturer of clothing worn by the workers. Here are a few other possible clues as to the origin of the name gandy dancer proposed by investigators: “I found a railroad stop or milestone in Alabama that was called Gandy, in a railway journal from around 1900. No idea if it is significant, and it was just mentioned in providing distance from one point to another.” “A man by the name of William M. Gandy was the managing editor of a publication called *The Making of America*. The 1906 publication had a number of chapters about the railroad, including discussion of maintenance of the way, pages 378-380. The book was produced in Chicago.” “The Gandy Tie and Timber Company is a sawmill located at 39228 Highway 171 in Florien, LA. How long has it existed? If it goes way back, one can just imagine workers “dancing” on the Gandy railroad ties,

.....ehh?” “I can give no etymological citations in support of this origin, but there’s little doubt in my mind that it’s correct. I grew up in East Syracuse, a block and a half from the DeWitt Yards which in the 1950s was still one of the largest, busiest and most technologically advanced railyards in the world. As kids, the term gandydancer was no more uncommon or odd to us than busboy was to city kids. Before pushing the tracks back at curves – before gandies, which were named for their wielders and not vice versa, before weed removal and other maintenance tasks, a gandy dancer was someone who carried the rail sections in and hand positioned them before they were nailed to the ties. Rails are enormously heavy and there’s only one way to lift or carry them. A crew of men straddles the rail at rough intervals, reaches down between their feet, grasps the rail, lifts it and carries it thus, bent, with their knees out to the side and their arms between their legs. A crew of men carrying a rail like this looks for all the world like a line of waddly geese. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, these crews were called ganders and laying the rail was gander dancing. This was corrupted to gandy dancers.” So, the name gandy dancer remains a mystery. So, what the heck do we know for sure?

- 1). We know that gandy dancers were part of railroad section crews and that the crews endured poor wages, hard physical labor and poor working conditions.
- 2). We know that most southern railroad workers were African American and recent immigrants; most western crews were Chinese, Mexican Americans (they called themselves traqueros) and Native Americans, and Midwestern crews were composed mostly of, Irish, Italians and East Europeans workers.
- 3). We know that rhythm was important and necessary to synchronize the manual labor and maintain worker morale. Work songs and hollers were sung in a call and response format. A good caller could go all day and never repeat a chant, both motivating and entertaining the men while establishing the timing and pacing of the work.
- 4). We know that modern machinery has replaced section crew work although track work is still done manually on an as needed basis, particularly on short line or tourist railroads. Workers using both machinery and manual tools to repair the rails are still called gandy dancers.

I am still not sure what a gandy dancer is or did, but I know more than when I started out and hope you do too!



### **“Ballin’ The Jack”**

I’ve always wondered where this expression came from after hearing it in old blues songs. It even sounds a little ‘R’ rated. Thanks to volunteer Mike McReynolds (former Sierra RR engineer), who did the research and found the original meaning.

Ballin’ the Jack was originally a popular ragtime dance tune by Jim Birris in 1913. Although many believe it was always a railroad slang term, it didn’t appear in that context until sometime in the 1920’s. In railroad terms, it usually meant working the engine at full speed. If a crew was running fast they were said to be “ballin’ the jack”. The use of the phrase is rarely heard today.



## Volunteer Profiles: Alex Sharp “Bagpipes & Steam”

Congratulations to Alex Sharp who in less than five years became our newest qualified locomotive engineer! Alex comes from a family who settled as miners in the 1860's in Amador County, and many also worked on the railroad. His great grandfather worked as superintendent of the Amador Central Railroad. The other great grandfather on the other side of the family worked on the Union Pacific in Wyoming and Utah. In college Alex majored in history and theatre arts and also obtained an associate of science degree at Columbia College. He currently works for the Amador Fire Protection district as an engineer.



Considering he had never ridden on a full sized railroad until he came to Railtown, it's quite an accomplishment to become a qualified locomotive engineer. He attended our March training series in 2010 and passed GCOR. He worked as a Car Host and on Fire Patrol the first year, and then qualified as a conductor in 2011. Shortly thereafter he worked as a student fireman in 2011. After qualifying, he worked in 2012 and into 2013 as a fireman and qualified as a student engineer. He has now qualified as an engineer in July.

A few other things of note about Alex make you think he's a renaissance man: He plays the piano, but loves to play the bagpipes more. He is often hired to play at weddings, funerals and parades; He is an amateur bee keeper; He is a qualified pilot and flies single engine planes; he is an actor and often performs with the Volcano Theatre Company in Volcano. He will be performing in the play 'Robinhood' starting August 15. I asked Alex what he likes most about Railtown and he simply said, "Everything! One of the big draws other than working on and running a steam engine, is the way history is preserved here. Here you walk into the historical roundhouse where everything still works after years and years. It's the whole aura of the park!"



## Railtown News

THE POLAR EXPRESS™ Train Ride is coming to Railtown 1897 State Historic Park! The popular train ride, based on the book and movie – *The Polar Express* – has made its way to Tuolumne County. Now children of all ages will be able to relive the magical journey of THE POLAR EXPRESS on an hour-long train ride to the North Pole. Guests enjoy hot chocolate and cookies as they ride along with some of the story's characters such as the Conductor and Hobo. Upon arriving at the "North Pole", the jolly old elf, Santa himself, will come on board to give each passenger a silver sleigh bell, the "first gift of Christmas".

Traditionally, tickets for this exciting family holiday event sell out very quickly. Members of Railtown 1897 will have the opportunity to purchase a limited number of tickets in advance of the general public. There are several categories of membership to suit every household – from \$35 - \$250. New members must join by September 5 to participate, and current members must be active through October 31, 2014 in order to participate in the Member Advance Ticket Sales. Trains departing Railtown 1897 are scheduled for 4:00 pm, 6:00 pm and 8:00 pm; Fridays through Sundays December 5-7; 12-14; 19-21.

Tickets are: Coach - \$40/person; First Class - \$55/person. Children under 2 years of age are free and must be seated on an adult's lap during the ride. Tickets will go on sale to the general public on October 9, 2014 and will be available for purchase online *only* at [www.railtown1897.org](http://www.railtown1897.org). Prior to the general public sales date volunteers & members of Railtown 1897 State Historic Park will be eligible to participate in Member Advance Ticket Sales. For more information about tickets or membership, please visit [www.railtown1897.org](http://www.railtown1897.org).

THE POLAR EXPRESS™ Train Ride is a fundraiser for the California State Railroad Museum Foundation, which supports Railtown 1897 State Historic Park. This special train ride will replace Railtown's other holiday train rides. (\*Note: There will be no trains on Thanksgiving weekend)



Nancy Johnson has been leading our new program which started

This year, "Story time in The Little Red Caboose". The program

at 11am is each Wednesday in July and August for ages 3 thru 8.

After reading a story she leads the youngsters on a little walking tour, demonstrating how to throw a switch and then looking at the locomotives in the Roundhouse.

Then after all that, they get to ride a real train. How much better could it get?

A well dressed trio!

Joe and Adelle's daughter, Vanessa visited us from New York on Saturday, July 20th and worked as a 'Greeter For A Day' volunteer.



**PO Box 1250**  
**Jamestown, CA 95327**  
**Return Service Requested**

**TO:**



**Depot Store-** (209) 984-3953  
**Volunteer Desk-** (209) 984-4408  
**Volunteer Website-** <http://railtown.team.parks.ca.gov/volunteers>  
**Railtown Blog-** [www.railtown1897.wordpress.com](http://www.railtown1897.wordpress.com)  
**Newsletter Editor—** [Dave.Rainwater@parks.ca.gov](mailto:Dave.Rainwater@parks.ca.gov)  
**Crew Caboose-** (209) 984-0352



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